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POP CULTURE

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FRANCOFOLIES

COURTESY OF UNIVERSAL MUSIC CANADA

On stage and behind shades, Alain Bashung acknowledges his audience as rarely as he does interviews, although he obliged the Montreal media.

Alain Bashung sees himself as 'an actor performing within a decor.' The king of melodrama has the theatricality that sets the best French-language singers apart

A world-class melancholy muse

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

The king of melodrama in French chanson, Alain Bashung, begins his show with utter abjection: "Tu perds ton temps / a mariner dans ses yeux / Tu perd ton sang." It's an image - love as embalmment - that the vitriolic Bob Dylan circa 1966 would have loved to have known enough French to write.

The opening dirge continues as the singer demonstrates undying devotion by name-checking such alter egos as Attila, Othello, Casanova, Machiavelli, William Tell - Harvey Keitel? If this is tenderness, this must be the art of classic French song at the millennium.

The black-and-white cover photo of his 2002 masterpiece, L'Imprudence, shows Bashung, 56, in a long black coat, an impenetrably sombre expression on his face, locked in a brooding jowl. On stage and behind shades, decked in leather, he acknowledges his audience as rarely as he does interviews. "Bonsoir" – heard on the live double-album of the current Tournée des grands espaces (Barclay/Universal) – is considered a breakthrough in communication. Introducing his young wife, singer Chloé Mons, for two duets, he explains: "C'est Chloé."

His "one major demand" in creating the almost hideously hallucinogenic swirl of sound of L'Imprudence, he told Radio France International last year, was "to use technology in a way that didn't show it off. I didn't want people to listen to the album and hear machines." He asked his sidemen to try their hand at string arrangements and some "added a new element of tragedy to the songs."

Reproducing the sweeping yet hermetic mood is the challenge behind La Tournée des grands espaces. He sees himself as "an actor performing within a decor." That would be wall-to-wall video displays of Bashung wearing a black Fellini fedora, traversing cliffs, piers, alleys, deserts and a place that looks suspiciously like Venice.

Carrying the weight of the world, not to mention amour, on one's shoulders is difficult stuff to pull off without sounding like a portentous ogre. But Bashung is a world-class moper whose gravitas makes Morrissey seem like a pipsqueak.

Bashung leads a pack of first-class songwriters and up-and-comers to the FrancoFolies festival, reflecting the singularity of French song craft on both sides of the Atlantic.

At the risk of generalizing, theatricality is what sets the best French-language singers apart. Playing characters, taking on roles, casting themselves as outside observers, they create a world apart from the Americanized glut of "me-me-me" rappers and lachrymose navel-gazing singer-songwriters. There's more of an accent on the musicality of language, dragging tradition into the new millennium, in a cauldron of stylistic influences from music hall to electronica.

The accent on poetics in French chanson may be anachronistic, but it's hardly inconsequential, if only because of 180 million French-speaking listeners. (That makes it the fifth-largest market globally, but with only about 7 million in the Americas, virtually all in Quebec). The francophonie has a genuine other-ness - the traditions of language, bien sur, undergoing percolating pan-cultural arrangements - that offers a real alternative to the anglo-American pop hegemony. It's why Montreal's FrancoFolies – situated near the belly of the American beast and an ocean away from the rest of the francophonie – has become such a fascinating bazaar of styles united by variations on language.

Thomas Fersen is the festival's most overt magician with bon mots, coolly pulling lyrics out of a hat, casually flipping lines like "Je sais désoler / Je n'ai que deux pieds," with utter insouciance.

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More on FrancoFolies, Page D3

Bashung promises 'poetic attitude'

The reclusive and mysterious Alain Bashung decided to speak yesterday afternoon at a hastily convened Montreal press conference to promote his upcoming concerts at FrancoFolies.

Eight years after his last tour, wearing his trademark black outfit with a colorful flowing scarf, he was asked what he expected from this outing, called La Tournée des grands espace.

"I've tried to create a show with a concept, as the last album (L'Imprudence) is quite particular. I tried to do something that wasn't in the tradition of music hall or even a typical rock concert. We talk about musical styles today, but it's the personality of the person that makes the difference."

The show, he explained, is "almost a kind of dream, a sort of interior voyage, perhaps a geography of the spirit. Perhaps that's a bit pretentious, but I'm usually somewhat reserved so I hold that right.

"There are no *slogans de combat* against anything. It's more of a poetic attitude. There are quite a few songs that look at the evolution of our compartment between each other. It's about our interior fears and dreams."

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Alain Bashung plays at the Metropolis, 59 Ste. Catherine St. E., tonight and tomorrow at 9 p.m. Some tickets remain for tomorrow's show and they cost $58.24 from the main festival box office via TicketPro, www.ticketpro.ca online or (514) 908-9090.

Un goût pour les mots

PASCALE MONTPETIT

À la petite école avec mon amie Liette, on faisait des listes de mots qu'on aimait. Au lieu de collectionner des timbres ou des cartes de hockey, on collectionnait des mots. "Crépuscule," "fenouil," "amertume," "saugrenu," "minuscule." Sur le papier, ils devenaient des bijoux scintillants. La liste se modifiait à l'infini selon nos humeurs.

Je me rappelle que Liette aimait le mot "broubaha" que moi je n'aimais pas. Pour ma part, j'aimais le mot "yogourt," mais pas "yaourt" – sans égard pour la chose qu'il représente.

Nous en discutions comme d'autres parlent de vin ou de parfum.

On ne saurait jouer à moins de frais.

Nous avons gardé ce goût-là pour les mots. Il m'est arrivé d'écrire avec du rouge à lèvres sur mon pare-brise un mot que je ne connaissais pas. Je n'avais pas de crayon pour le noter et j'avais peur de l'oublier.

Liette a aussi gardé ses habitudes. Elle continue à dégainer le dictionnaire au moindre doute. Hier soir, entre deux bouchées de gâteau d'anniversaire, on cherchait la traduction française de armadillo. "Tu sais, la bestiole préhistorique avec une carapace qui traverse les rues au Mexique ... Ta ... Tat ... TATOU!"

J'aime certains mots: caramel, mélancolie, affolement, délice, nuit, tintinnabuler.

Et aussi "vil," qui dit bien ce qu'il veut dire, tout comme "rigolo" d'ailleurs.

Alors que "ragoûtant" dit exactement le contraire; un plat ragoûtant (beurk). Ou "albâtre," son teint d'albâtre (yark). Ou "glabre": une peau glabre (ouaches).

Le mot le plus laid que j'aie entendu: "proette." Il désigne une joueuse de golf professionnelle. Le féminin de "pro" je suppose. Quelque chose entre prout et brouette.

En anglais, j'aime "preposterous" (ridicule). Ça a quelque chose de britannique et de collet monté. "Oh good Lord, this is preposterous!"

Ou encore "strumpet" (prostituée). "Impudent strumpet!" Plus punché que son équivalent en français: "courtisane effrontée!"

Quand j'apprends un texte de théâtre, je mémorise les mots en les roulant dans ma bouche comme si je sucais des bonbons. Ils n'ont pas tous le même goût. Celui-ci est amer, cet autre salé. Celui-là est acide ou brûlant ou croustillant.

Si, comme l'a écrit Gaston Bachelard, "tous les mots font honnêtement leur métier dans le langage de la vie quotidienne," on dirait qu'ils se comportent autrement dans la bouche d'un acteur.

En ce moment, on répète une pièce du 18ème siècle. À l'époque, l'insulte suprême c'était "fagotin" (difficile de faire vibrer le mot). "Fagotin," de la charpie de fureur. On dirait qu'il est trop léger, trop "poupin, lutin, mutin, batin, tintin."

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